

A Message from your County Councillor – February 2017

February is always Budget time in local government. This year with cuts to Government grants the Band D Council Tax for Swale residents has gone up by £57 per year. Kent County Council increased their tax by the maximum 1.99% plus 2% for the Social Care levy. The Police and Crime Commissioner put up his precept by £5 and Swale Borough Council by £4.95 per year per household. Swale Borough Council was hoping for a seventh consecutive freeze. A decision by Government to take £805,000 of New Homes Bonus money over the next 3 years from the Borough Council was followed by a late increase in the precept for the Lower Medway Drainage Board of £456,000 for inland flood defenses. These two factors, and their timing combined to make this impossible to achieve.

It has been a strange Budget Cycle this year. At Kent County Council most, fairly innocuous, opposition amendments were taken on board by the ruling Conservative Group so we had a Budget most Councillors could support. At Swale the only amendment proposed was from the two Councillor Independent Group. The final Budget was approved by a massive majority of 31-7 with several opposition Councillors voting in support.

This month has been a time of farewells. Swale Borough Council's Chief Executive Abdool Kara has left for a new job at the National Audit Office. On a sadder note we said goodbye to local benefactor Sir John Swire at a packed Memorial Service in Canterbury Cathedral. Few local charities can have failed to benefit from Sir John's generosity. A true gentleman, I shall miss Sir John not just for his generosity but equally for the ever interesting conversations, often when his gardens at Luton House were opened to the public for charity. I would wish to add my condolences to Lady Swire and the family.

The other "big ticket" item this month has been Planning in all its guises. The Government appointed Inspector has now completed her examination into the Swale Local Plan and we await her report probably in April. We have had a written appeal against the Borough Councils decision to refuse a cold store at Owens Court Lane to which I sent my written objection. We also had a Planning Site meeting at Winterbourne Quarry. The application for four dwellings was subsequently approved by the Borough Council Planning Committee. Local representation I received was pretty evenly split.

During February I have attended Parish Council meetings at Boughton, Newnham, Doddington, Dunkirk and Lynsted.

A happy event was travelling to Battersea with a group of Borough Council Officers for the Sunday Times sponsored "100 Best Not For Profit Businesses To Work For Awards". This is the first time Swale Borough Council has been nominated and we are proud to have finished second highest placed Local Authority. A great tribute to recently departed Chief Executive Abdool Kara as these awards are based on surveys of staff. I always believe 'a happy ship is a successful ship'.

Andrew Bowles